

## The Language of Birds by Your\_Iron\_Lung

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**Summary:**

(Sequel to 'The Language of Flowers')

Sometimes love manifests itself as a disease; nigh incurable and invariably fatal. Hanahaki, they call it- the disease of flowers.

Steve has lived his entire life with it, managing the symptoms as best he can until he simply can't any longer.

He's never met anyone else who's suffered the same way until Billy Hargrove.

# The Language of Birds

## Author's Note:

'A man saw a bird and found him beautiful. The bird had a song inside him, and feathers. Sometimes the man felt like the bird and sometimes the man felt like a stone- solid, inevitable- but mostly he felt like a bird, or that there was a bird inside him, or that something inside him was like a bird fluttering.

This went on for a long time.'

-Richard Siken

The first time it happens, he doesn't understand why the rest of his elementary school friends run from him screaming 'cooties!' at the top of their lungs.

Steve holds the yellow flower petal in his hand and cries because he doesn't understand what it means, or why it came from so deep within his itchy throat. His mom thought he'd had something called 'strep', but when the beautiful, kind Ms. Julia takes him to the school nurse he finds out she was wrong.

Both Ms. Julia and the nurse share a worried glance when he presents his flower petals to them. The nurse calls his mom, and for a moment Steve believes he's in trouble, but if being in trouble means he gets to spend some extra time alone with his teacher, then, well, maybe getting into trouble is worth it.

His mom picks him up from school early, but instead of going home she takes him to an emergency doctor even though he doesn't feel sick. She looks so scared that Steve becomes scared, worried of what he's done wrong to prompt this trip.

He asks her what's wrong, why the strep is causing flower petals to push up out of his throat, but she doesn't answer; only attempts to comfort him by repeatedly saying: "It's nothing, sweetheart, don't worry. You're okay."

But the doctor disagrees with her when they finally arrive.

The doctor is young, but is already outstanding in her field. She's the only doctor close to Hawkins that treats Hanahaki Disease, but she's never had to treat it in a patient as young as the little Harrington boy.

"It's rare, but not entirely unheard of," she says to Mrs. Harrington, who has tears in her eyes and won't take her hand away from her mouth, already grieving. Steve watches them talk from atop the examination table, holding a few of the yellow petals in his hands. They're soft and velvety; smooth to the touch, and he doesn't know why they should be causing his mother so much distress. "Children fall in love with things all the time; just because they're young doesn't mean they're immune to their feelings."

The doctor turns away from his mother and smiles at Steve, coaxing a shy smile from him in return.

"What's the name of your favourite teacher at school, Steve?" she asks, and Steve's shy smile transforms instantly into one that is so much more genuine; he even starts to giggle.

"Missus Julia."

"Is she nice?" Steve nods, fingers tightening around the petals. "Pretty too I bet, huh?"

"Yes," he replies. "She smiles at me every day."

The doctor turns a knowing look to his mother, who finally takes her hand away from her mouth to speak.

"Is it- will he be okay?"

"Hanahaki is 100% treatable, but I'd like to take some x-rays to get a better idea of what we're dealing with here."

Steve's mother nods, and the doctor takes him by the hand and leads him out of the room.

The technicians take the x-rays, cooing over how *adorable* little Steve

is. The doctor of course agrees that he is, but this is a medical practice, so could they please not get too distracted? The x-rays come back quickly enough after their exchange, and the doctor is dismayed by what she sees. Steve's condition is abnormal in more ways than one, which is saddening, because his capacity for love is so strong.

Even still, she understands his life is on the line, and the disease must be treated.

"In most cases, Hanahaki manifests itself in the host's lungs," she begins, speaking slowly as she pins up the x-rays to the light board for Mrs. Harrington to observe, "but in Steve's case, it appears to have taken root in his heart-"

"His *heart*?!"

"Yes," she replies calmly, aware that Steve is monitoring their reactions. "Again, it's not untreatable, but the usual recommended surgery to remove it is invasive, and not generally recommended for a patient his age."

Mrs. Harrington starts to cry, and the doctor really wishes she hadn't. It's not an ideal situation, but it's not like her son is *dead*. On the examination table behind them, Steve shares in his mother's grief and also begins to cry.

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He sees the doctor off and on throughout his life. His unique condition requires routine monitoring to adjust medication doses in order to keep the flower from completely harvesting his heart, because no one wants to have to put him through the open-heart surgery to remove it. They become friends, in a word- about as good of friends as a doctor who treats a patient with a chronic heart condition *can* be friends- and he's never really been unhappy to see her until his break up with Nancy.

His medicine stops working. The flowers and pain in his heart become more persistent, and he's ashamed to admit that he breaks down in the exam room over it.

*"Bullshit,"* he mutters, spitting Nancy's words out with disgust. He reaches into his mouth and pulls out a petal that's been caught in his throat for the past hour. "It was all just *bullshit* to her."

His doctor smiles a bit sardonically, and she wishes she could tell Steve that first loves often *are* just bullshit, but she's not a therapist and doesn't want to invalidate his feelings, although she knows that Nancy is just one of many in a long series of heartaches for Steve.

"How long have your symptoms been persisting?" she asks, kindly ignoring his tears as he wipes them away.

"Couple of weeks. A few months, maybe."

*"Steve."* She doesn't bother hiding her disapproval, her brow furrowing as she admonishes him. "*Months?* You should've come sooner; you can't afford to go months without treatment!"

"I didn't want to believe it, alright?!" he says angrily, though most of his anger is directed towards himself for believing everything was fine in spite of the evidence. "We were *happy*; she told me she loved me, *kept* telling me she loved me, so how could I be choking up those fucking flowers if that were true?" He snuffles and looks up at the ceiling for a moment, collecting himself before he can address his physician again. "I mean, would *you* believe it, if someone kept saying that to you?"

Her professionalism keeps her from answering honestly.

"I would have come to see me the minute I realized my medication stopped working," she says and sighs, studying him for a minute. That great capacity to love that he's carried with him since he was a child is still strong, and she's comforted by that thought, but at the same time it's worrisome. "The growth in your heart could have advanced; we need to make sure it hasn't."

He touches his hand to his chest briefly, still wallowing in his sadness, and she sympathizes for him, she really does, but he's treading a very fine line: to let the disease advance any further could result in surgery. Steve stays quiet while the x-rays get taken, and his doctor is relieved to see that the flower's growth has been minimal.

The roots have spread, yes, but it isn't gotten to the point where he needs the surgery just yet, though there isn't much point in fighting the inevitable.

"Don't do this again, Steve; you're really pushing your limits here."

She ups the dosage on his medication and prescribes him an antidepressant and releases him back into the world he can't afford to love too strongly.

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When Billy goes down hard on the court after being shoved violently aside in what *should* have been called out as a foul, everyone expects him to get back up and start a fight over it, but he doesn't. No one's sure what to do when he starts coughing, and Steve swears the whole gymnasium goes quiet just so they can listen to each strangled intake of breath.

His teammates cast nervous looks at each other, but no one makes a move to help him. As captain of the team, Steve takes the initiative and jogs over to his side to try and help him up. Billy brushes him aside but he persists, reaching out his hand for support but stalls when Billy throws up, a horrific mixture of blood and flowers spewing across the midcourt line.

"Holy shit dude," he says, brown eyes blown wide at the familiar sight.

"Fuck off," Billy hisses before fleeing the scene, leaving the mess for the Bellevue High janitor to mop up so they can finish their game.

Steve watches Billy's health deteriorate rapidly over the course of the next few weeks, and it's like he's seeing an alternate version of himself that decided to rot instead of seek help with treating the symptoms.

It's *agonizing* seeing him like this; suffering to maintain an image that is losing value the more time that passes.

So he tells him about his doctor; about the options she provides so

that maybe he doesn't *have* to die if he doesn't actually want to, because despite what he says, there's a spark in his eye that shines when he looks at Steve that suggests he isn't seeking death quite as hard as he lets on that he is.

In the end, he gets the treatment. Goes to see Steve's doctor and comes back to school healthy as ever, physically. He does a good job of hiding it, but Steve can tell that, emotionally, Billy hasn't healed, and there's something about his sorrowful looks and how beautiful his personal tragedy is that draws Steve in, compels him to care despite his best efforts *not* to. Billy's not the first boy he's managed to develop strong feelings for, but when the flowers come back, *again*, he tries to tell himself that he's wrong: there's no way in *hell* he's fallen for Billy Hargrove.

Except, the flowers are different this time.

For as long as he can remember, the flowers he's been infected with have always been the same colour and texture: for his elementary school teacher, for his middle school crush, for the French foreign exchange boy that came to Hawkins freshman year, and even for Nancy, the flowers in his heart have always manifested themselves as soft and yellow. But the flowers he coughs up for Billy aren't yellow, or velvety soft to the touch- no, instead he finds himself coughing up *husks*. Paper-thin, dried up, brittle petals that cause tears in his throat when he coughs that give the little grey shreds some colour.

When he coughs up flower petals this time, they're dead.

He panics; what does it mean? What *could* it mean? It's related to Billy in some regard, but his fear prevents him from thinking too much about it.

His medicine stops working and the coughing gets worse. Steve heeds his doctor's prior advice and immediately goes to see her, but she isn't as surprised as he thought she'd be.

Just like with the rest of the circumstances surrounding his variant of the disease, it's extremely rare, but not entirely unheard of.

"It happens, from time to time," she explains, studying one of the

petals that Steve coughs up. It falls apart easily in her fingers, but has hard edges that've been tearing up her patient's throat.

"Why?" Steve asks, and his voice is hoarse from the abuse it's been enduring. "It's never been like this before."

His doctor tilts her hand over the little garbage bin in the room and lets the fragile petals fall in. She wipes her hand clean of the remains and then takes a seat on a little black stool, flipping through Steve's file.

With a deep intake of breath, she sets the file aside and looks Steve in the eye. "When a patient exhibits symptoms like this, it's because the subject of their affection physically isn't capable of reciprocating."

"What does *that* mean?" He feigns ignorance, but he understands the implication of her words.

*Billy.* Billy had *liked* him; had had real, *genuine* feelings for him that had eventually begun to kill him, and Steve had so callously rejected him- told him to get them cut out and to move on.

*"I mean, why let yourself suffer over someone who doesn't even like you back, right?"*

But how could he have *known*? How could he have possibly known?

There was nothing, never an indicator that Billy could have ever *liked him*- except, except for all the side-long glances Steve had pretended to ignore. The way Billy always sought him out after their team won a game to softly touch him on the back in shared congratulation with a hand that always lingered a little too long. The smiles, the goading, the pathetic attempts to always be in Steve's periphery to just be able to *look* at him.

His chest feels heavy, and his heart *aches* like the roots of his disease are strangling it when he remembers the gory mixture of flowers and blood Billy spit out for him.

"You know what it means," his doctor says with a soft voice, watching him somberly as he blinks out a few tears. "We're going to have to remove it now, Steve, do you understand? It's in its final



stages now.”

Steve nods, shakes his head, lets out an abrupt sob and nods again.

He lets her call his mom from her office to talk about his progress and to schedule the surgery.

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Because of the severity of his operation, Steve is benched from playing in any of the remaining games his team has left in the season, but that's fine; Steve finds it very hard to care about the sport when Billy won't even look at him anymore. The asshole doesn't even try to rile him up the way he used to, and half the fun of playing on a team with a man like that was the competition between them.

But now there's nothing left.

Steve's chest still hurts, but it's only because he's recovering now.

### **Author's Note:**

a LOT of people wanted a sequel to 'the language of flowers' and uh

well

this probably isnt what they wanted when they asked for 'a happy ending' lol

(sorry not sorry)

ANYWAY, maybe consider following my writing tumblr at [your-iron-lung.tumblr.com](http://your-iron-lung.tumblr.com); i take writing prompts and i like to talk about my writing :>

and dont forget to leave a comment! i love those dang things